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Book Review: Convent Life in Colonial Mexico: A Tale of Two Communities

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Convent Life in Colonial Mexico: A Tale of Two Communities. Stephanie L. Kirk. 2007. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida. 241 pp (+ ix; includes appendix, notes, bibliography; index). \$59.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Margaret E. Boyle¹

Stephanie L. Kirk's ambitious study, *Convent Life in Colonial Mexico: A Tale of Two Communities* reconstructs the convent space in seventeenth- and eighteenth- century Mexico, considering nuns not as merely secular or religious writers, but through the lens of interdisciplinary study, as multifaceted historical agents. The crux of her argument focuses on the ways in which these women formed communities, alliances, and even friendships within the convent in direct defiance of Church authority. Meticulous analyses of the Church's regulation of daily life in the convent, as well as discursive analyses of their larger containment strategies, offer the reader a glimpse of a culture obsessed with isolating women. Because of their naturally "dangerous" qualities, the Church toiled to devise ways of protecting women from easy corruption of their virtue. More importantly, alliances between women were perceived as a threat not only to the well being of individual women, but also to a social order dependant on their control. The book's combined focus on 17th and 18th century texts allow for an intriguing comparative analysis that takes into account the combination of lingering post-Tridentine reforms as well as the development of Enlightenment ideals and political reform. Most provocatively, the work considers the ways in which women's immobility, both inside and outside of convent spaces, is central to the colonial project.

Although significant contributions to the understanding of colonial convent spaces have been made in the last two decades, with the now fundamental *Untold Sisters* incorporated into many undergraduate course syllabi along with many other projects inspired by Electra Arenal and Stacy Schlau's work, Kirk's project distinguishes itself for its unique selection of source material and analyses. Incorporating theoretical perspectives from a varied collection of authors including Amy Allen, Hannah Arendt, Roland Barthes, Judith Butler, Jonathan Dollimore, Michel Foucault, Nancy Hardstock, and Joan Scott, the work speaks to the relationship between power and gender in ways that would interest not only Latin American or Early Modern scholars, but also those working in broader projects concerning religion, sexuality and community formation. In addition, it is worth mentioning the breadth of documents considered in this study, ranging from literary texts to religious tracts and conduct manuals to Inquisition documents.

The idealized image of the convent space projected by Church authorities emphasized the virtue of solitude, a place where nuns were "'muertas al mundo' (dead to the world) and ideally...dead to each other, their only sanctioned relationships being with their divine husband and his earthly intermediary, the confessor" (13). This idealized image of the passive and solitary nun is put into contrast with representations found in unofficial documents, where nuns actively participate in shaping their convent community. It is important that Kirk is aware of a tendency for contemporary scholars to

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over-emphasize the potential for solidarity within all-female spaces (10) and works to acknowledge the divisive effects of race and class within these communities. She avoids reductive argumentation by proposing a specific working definition of “community”, in which fluid “micro- and macro-communities of different kinds [...] stood in opposition to the controlled community that the Church authorities attempted to impose from outside” (13). This kind of comparative analysis puts Kirk into dialogue with the historian Magdalena S. Sánchez, who has made a parallel argument for the women in the Spanish court of Philip III.

The work’s organization reflects this comparative structure, emphasizing the link between “ideal” and “real” spaces, since each of the four chapters that follow the introduction dedicate themselves to distinct textual representations of the convent community. First, the construction of an “ideal” community is reflected through a study of two instructive texts written by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s confessor, Antonio Núñez de Miranda. Second, an analysis of an Inquisition case concerning an 18th century nun accused of *mala amistad* (an illicit relationship) with a female servant offers not only a glimpse into the fear of alliances between women, but also offers the textual remnants of an intimate relationship. Next, a comparative study between 18th century ecclesiastical documents which attempt to implement communal living in convent spaces combined with records of protest from nuns mobilized against these changes reveals yet another reflection of community, once again from both the perspective of outside and inside, male and female. Finally, the work considers the formation of intellectual alliances between women by returning to the example of Sor Juana, reinventing the widely disseminated image of her personal solitude by the evidence of the community created through her writings.

Considered as a whole, Kirk’s project helps to illuminate a highly-understudied section of Early Modern history: the possibility of friendship between women during a time in which extreme constraint was imposed onto these historical subjects. Female friendship is discussed in terms of a long-standing “historical silence”, one which the work aims to disrupt through writing: by striving “to write the importance of female intellectual alliances and communities into the history of women in the seventeenth-century convent and to demonstrate their effectiveness as tools against the prevailing fictions of misogyny – both then and now” (175). What is difficult about this project is perhaps the breadth of this claim. Although the work takes important steps towards illuminating the possibility and ramifications of alliances between women, four specific historical instances in 17th and 18th century Mexico are used to make larger claims about convent life. Overall, it seems more attention could have been paid to emphasizing the specificity of the historical and literary texts in question, showing the ways each chapter can be read as an individual case study. Read together, however, these chapters can open and encourage the discussion of female alliance within the centuries in question. The importance of the kind of innovative theoretical work undertaken by this text, in terms of source material and selection of critics, cannot be over-emphasized, and will offer a both provocative and illuminating read to scholars in a broad range of disciplines.